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"Everything I Know about Good and Bad Life I Learned From
 Pigeons."

Fiction of William Wharton as a Course in Practical Ethics.

Albert du Aime alias William Wharton provoked an enquiry into his personal understanding of ethics when, in an interview which later became a part of the book *Kim jest William Wharton* by Joanna Podolska, he explained the genesis of his first published novel, *Birdy* (1978) as follows:

the true impulse for writing this book was a discussion I had with my friend about good and evil. I told her that everything I knew about that subject I had learned from my pigeons. She didn't understand it so I wanted to explain further. And I wrote *Birdy*.ⁱ

The reasons for such an analysis seem the more pronounced as his readers often stress the fact that they take the novels as guidebooks for their own life.

An analysis of Wharton's works proves that they are indeed united by a common ethical thought. Furthermore, it seems that the writer considers his literary work a way of sharing this set of concepts with a wider audience. As far as certain later

ⁱ Podolska, Joanna, *Kim jest William Wharton*, Poznań, 1996, p. 33.

novels, starting with *Houseboat on the Seine. A Memoir*, (1996) they may even be treated as parables arranged specifically in order to present a moral dilemma and provide a solution that the author wants to propose.

Certain restrictions should be clarified at this point. The first of them is that William Wharton does not use his work to propagate an already existing ethical system. It seems, however, that he is well versed in the philosophical schools of his age (the presence of the existentialist thought is the most pronounced) and he discusses their assumptions when they are faced with reality as it is in *Tidings* (1987) Although it is naturally possible to detect certain general ethical conceptions such as Aristotle's "happiness is the ideal of the whole life and not a moment"ⁱⁱ in his personal ethics, none of the existing ethical thoughts ever becomes his own

William Wharton does not consider himself a philosopher. He does not intend to create a coherent theoretical system which he would like (as Soren Kierkegaard did) to present through fiction. Quite on the contrary, the writer rejects the role of a guru, though he sees his duty to play the role of a teacher of morality as he understands it:

I'm am not popular though I am a populist. I write as clearly and simply as I can about difficult matters in such a way which can be understood by the largest possible number of readers.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱ Conf. MacIntyre, Alasdair, *A Short History of Ethics. A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*. New York, 1966, p. 101.

ⁱⁱⁱ Podolska, Joanna, p. 53.

Wharton rejects the concept that art does not have to fulfil an educational role. He goes as far as to claim that he limits, confines his art to make it fulfil its educational purpose more completely. Such a blunt statement may even be treated as a tongue-in-cheek disclosure of the consciousness of one's own artistic limitations. Such limitations, however, become important only when they hinder the achievement of the educational purpose. As the writer stated in a comment on one of his paintings: "Sometimes my concepts outrun my capacity. I don't think I'm unique in that area".^{iv}

He claims that he intends to transmit his personal experience through his works. This limitation, however, does not mean that the experience is regarded as particular. It is presented as such but its meaning is generalised and presented as applicable to reader's own life - although reading of this generalisation (at least in the early works of Wharton) is left to the reader.

The fact that William Wharton does not intend to create a coherent philosophical system allows him to concentrate on a fairly limited set of matters. He does not have to dispute and solve the problems that do not have a direct influence on his subject matter. Furthermore, he does not point out a basis for his moral teaching thus seemingly following Kant's statement "starry sky above me moral law inside me" while approaching the attitude of existentialists. William Wharton quite clearly rejects religion as basis for moral behaviour - although he

^{iv} Quotation taken from an unpublished album of Wharton's paintings - commentary to the painting *Apples in the Basket* from 1987. There is no English edition of the book, it has been so far only published in Polish as William Wharton, *William Wharton*, Rebis, Poznań 1998, p. 107.

presents a simple system of religious thought - the most detailed presentation of which is given in *Ever After* (1995).^v

Lack of a system or attempts at systematisation make Wharton free to focus on what is most important for him - the individual. His ethical thought concentrates on the conflict of the individual versus society and the role and position an individual plays within society. The choice of such subject matter is stressed by the construction of his novels which always concentrate on one hero, author's spokesman whose adventures constitute the focal point of action. In certain cases as in *Scumbler* (1984) the hero holds the action together. The events, as in a picaresque, matter only as much as they influence the hero or as much as his influence upon them allows presentation of an ethical question.

The message that can be found in Wharton's works is a two-fold one - on the one hand his heroes reject the system, state and society (the motif of emigration as a form of an attempted escape from the three is ubiquitous in his fiction) putting a stress on their individualism. On the other hand, the drive towards individualism is limited by the importance of family and, to a lesser degree, friendship.

The negation of state and system is never pushed to the limit. Wharton directs his criticism more towards people who serve them - the lawyers in *Ever After*, the French police CRS in *Scumbler* or the malevolent doctors in *Dad* (1981) - then his enemies themselves. The hero grumbles but never truly rebels.

^v "I believe that a Ghost exists and we are all a part of Him. I believe that in some moment the Ghost departs and this is what people call death. Probably our ghost is then united with a larger Ghost. Actually, it does not matter if we call him Ghost or anywhere else." Podolska, Joanna, p. 61.

Similarly, the pacifism preached in such novels as *Birdy* (1978), *Worth Trying* (1998) or *Midnight Clear* (1982) is strong enough to bring about an action only in the case of Scumbler who was imprisoned as a conscientious objector during the Second World War.

However, the fight against the system is still fought although on an every day level. In such instances it is not always legal and - if ethics is understood as set a of rules regulating social life - not necessarily ethical. The heroes present here a great deal of selfishness which is only limited by a live and let live attitude. It is always stressed, however, that personal profit matters only inasmuch as it guarantees the financial support needed by the family. The drive to make and have more is never the motivating force behind the decisions of the hero. Quite on the contrary, the message here can be summed up in this short statement – you should know what is enough for you.

Wharton's criticism is directed mainly against modern American society, the competitive society and it leads the heroes to abandon the United States for France or Italy. They realise, however, that emigration means a rejection of their roots. In *Tidings*, the children accuse their father of depriving them of a sense of belonging. The heroes of *Tidings*, *Dad*, (1981) *Last Lovers* (1991) and *Scumbler* ask themselves whether they did the right thing making their dream of Europe come true. The question is never answered. Rather, it is treated as a part of discussion concerning the responsibility of an individual towards others.

In Wharton's opinion, the system should be opposed by a set of simple values - friendship, love and family. It is important, especially as far as readers' reactions are concerned, that the writer does not aim at presenting an ideal, utopian community (excluding *Franky Furbo*, 1989). The family, especially in the early novels, is presented in the moment of crisis which works as a detonator - brings to the surface hidden conflicts and allows their solution. Gradually, in the more recently published novels, the importance of the internal crisis disappears and the family is presented as united when facing external danger as in for example the sinking of their houseboat in *Houseboat on the Seine. A Memoir* (1996) or restoration of an old mill in *Tales of the Moulin du Bruit* (1997).

The motif of an internal crisis which usually takes form of destruction of family caused by an extramarital affair allows Wharton a wider presentation of his views upon family. The solution is usually found when the offender realises the importance of family for him or herself and their relatives. However, marriage itself never becomes an absolute value. If family ties are weakened, an individual has the right to decide whether it is reasonable to continue. Wharton's advice on how to make that decision is simple:

love is a combination of admiration, respect and passion. If one of the feelings is alive, there is no reason to make a fuss. If two of them are, it may not be the world championship but close. If the three are, you don't need to die, you already are in heaven.^{vi}

^{vi} Wharton, William, *Wrongful Deaths*, New York, 1994, p. 14.

If a union of man and woman does not pass this test it can be dissolved. Divorce is always presented as a tragedy, especially for the children, which again brings forth the question of responsibility. It may be though a step towards better stage in life. One should note, however, the recurrence of the motive of pigeons which "are united for lifetime. They dance for all the females but mate only once."^{vii}

Family does not always mean a natural one. The most moving usage of the motif can be found in *A Midnight Clear* (1982). The teenage soldiers sent to European front create a surrogate family in which one of them, "a dropout - but not fallen - priest"^{viii} is the Father while another, the oldest, is the Mother. This "family" helps them to survive in situations for which they have not been prepared and, finally, family values, strange as it may sound bearing in mind their situation, save them from a catastrophe.

One of forces that unite the family is common work, common effort. William Wharton was born in a working class family and he retained the respect for physical work typical for his class. Born in Philadelphia he is also clearly under the influence of Benjamin Franklin and the ideal of self-made man. Common effort is praised most overtly in *Saying Uncles* (1997). The meaning of work is manifold - one common characteristic though is that it is always treated with respect. The specific kind of work does not necessarily matter. The heroes who usually are more or less veiled autobiographical representations of the author are most often either painters or

^{vii} Wharton, William, *Last Lovers*, New York, 1991, p. 65.

^{viii} Wharton, William, *A Midnight Clear*, New York, 1996, p. 9.

writers. Apart from aesthetical value of painting, discussed at length, the heroes and the author always stress the fact that it is also a way of supporting the family.

Apart from this at least three other meanings of work can be found. Work is a means of achieving communication with society - the painter does not truly mix, he is separate, the rest of the society is often treated as sitters but work makes him always a part of the social discourse. It is his work that forces him into communication with other people, to make friends, to enter new situations and experiences which would otherwise be inaccessible to him.

Work and physical effort also has a liberating power - this process is best presented in *Last Lovers* (1991). The hero through the physical effort connected with painting in the streets combined with the psychological effort of communication with a blind woman begins to understand the errors he made in his life. Only when his task - painting a cycle of landscapes which record the memories of his lover - is finished, is he able to move to the next stage of life. Individual and physical work becomes a cure against entanglement in competitive society. The third way of approaching the matter is presentation of common everyday work which serves to strengthen friendship or family ties, for the first time such motive can already be found in *Birdy* (1978). It seems important that even the work of a flayer can enforce the friendship of the heroes, Al and Birdy.

The conclusion from such a praise of physical work is often that a man can be tried only through physical effort - it is especially important as Wharton does not show great respect for any purely intellectual activity. It is most clearly visible in

Tidings where the hero, an existentialist philosopher, has to resort to sawing wood in order to regain contact with his son. And yet, work is also a means of imprisoning the individual - a prison from which an individual often wants to escape and yet cannot do so, even if given a chance as he is in the final chapter of *Scumbler*. It is the most visible in *Tidings* - the sculptor Spike is so engrossed in his work that he rejects his chance for love and for creating a family.

The examples selected here may give the impression of certain inconsistency in the presentation of William Wharton's personal ethics. It seems as though these inconsistencies become a feature of his writing. His heroes realise their own weakness and the fact that they live on the edge of the system, which they use or abuse. Their strength lies in the fact that instead of giving in to despair they attempt to build their own worlds, their own lives. They can only resort to values which protect them as long as they believe in them and try to protect them in turn. If they lose, they have the courage to accept it.

It is important that the model of life presented by the writer is extremely difficult to follow. Becoming a painter who earns much enough to paint in his leisure, lives on a houseboat on the outskirts of Paris with his wife and children is not an easy task. It must therefore be the overall spirit that pervades the books that the readers want to imitate in their lives. The writer seems to say through his books, "I also had doubts, but I tried to make the right choices and now I am a happy man." Maybe it is the openness about one's own failures, why the values which emerge through the novels are so willingly accepted.

On the whole, Wharton prefers suggestion, he never puts himself in the position of a preacher trying to convince the reader that the truths he propagates are eternal. One cannot help noticing, however, that the values he concentrates upon are the most simple ones - family, friendship, love, loyalty - although there is never enough propagating them it is not an extremely difficult task especially that they hardly ever are openly rejected.

The success of William Wharton is a combination of three elements - he is a psychologist and an experienced teacher therefore he knows how to teach, a thinker, he knows which truths should be taught, and an artist - he is able to introduce his message into the form of the novel. Wharton does not have to resort to theory, quite on the contrary, his understanding of ethics is purely practical. Through his novels he creates a persona of a grandfather whose knowledge though not sophisticated is accepted as it rests on the solid base of his personal experience. Whether it may be accepted as an artistic success or not is a different matter. It remains beyond any doubt that this medium works as a method of presenting an ethical model which is willingly accepted, especially by the young generation of readers.

Postscript: Only after the final version of this paper was completed I received the typescript of the latest book written by William Wharton *The Green Lung* dated the 4th of October, 1998. To my great surprise I discovered that the short book included a concise presentation of William Wharton's personal ethics. However, as the novel only supported the conclusions

already given above I decided not to introduce any changes into the text presented during the conference.

It seems important, however, to remark that in *The Green Lung* William Wharton puts a greater stress on ecological and environmental awareness following certain ideas that have been present in his fiction since the publication of *Franky Furbo* (1989). Naturally, the statement that William Wharton never attempted to present his ethical concepts in a complete form no longer holds true.